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## The Prettybird Plight

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Tuesday:

It all started with the bulldog.

Long have I watched Master throw the sodden fuzzgreen down the hallway of the apartment, only to have it brought back by the bulldog in even worse straits. Master's face would widen and he would posit, "Who'sagoohboyden, eh? Who'sagoohboy?" Then Master left shortly after sunrise yesterday and refused to feed the bulldog before leaving. Master later showed signs of remorse and claimed to have forgotten, but we know better.

"Maybe," the bulldog says between bites of the fuzzgreen as he waits with ascetic meditation for Master to return from his daily ritual. "Maybe the goohboy ain't me." His watery eyes wobble up to where I have perched upon my swing. "Maybe s'you?" But I pretend not to hear. He licks his jowls with that slobbery tongue. "Maybe I done somethin' wrong. Maybe I got to leave fr'im to come back. Maybe he don't want me here no more, cuz I ain't no goohboy."

"Don't be ridiculous," I tell him.

"Oh? An' how's you s'posed t'know why he don't come back?" he asks, coming closer to my abode with his lumbering gait. "You's th'one he cages, bird. How'd y'know it ain't your fault?"

"This is a palace, not a cage, you plebeian."

Unable to respond to my scathing reply, the bulldog returns to his meditative chewing and remains silent. For preference, I compose with my jinglebell, but I, too, begin to wonder what causes the Master's suffering to be so great that he feels compelled to withhold his presence from us every day.

Wednesday:

Master has recently supplied my abode with a shining device. I, being an appreciator of the finer arts, thought it was another jinglebell, but when I approached it, not only did it refuse

to jingle whatsoever, but I also caught within it glimpses of another parakeet.

I have realized that this device is clearly a portal, which will not do.

No matter how well I seek to tune the jinglebell, Master's face widens in that same cringe as when the bulldog gives him the fuzzgreen which he is clearly trying to dispose of. The uncultured swine in the portal won't go near his jinglebell, but this may be a tactic to win Master's attention. I have tried singing as well, only the new parakeet mocks me. Desperate, I have torn down his portal thrice, but Master seems upset with me for this and always clips it back up and speaks softly to it.

"Who's a prettybird?" he asks on occasion. I know not who he asks. Who is the prettybird? I once swore I was he, with my artfully curved beak, my vibrant green wings, my sweet little talons heralding the ancestry from the mighty hawk. Then I found this fetching fellow from the portal. His face is a radiant yellow, and his back is dappled with mysterious black patterning! How is a bird to compete with someone so dapper and dashing?

I have consulted the poor devil I find visiting me sometimes in my water dish. His face is bleary and strange and he's a quiet sort, but he gives me a meaningful look and I know that he agrees with me. There can only be one prettybird, and I fear it may not be me.

In vain, I swing on my perch like the bulldog retrieves the fuzzgreen, but I am only fooling myself. If I truly cared for Master, I would wait until the next time he opened my chamber door to fill my dish with seeds and I would fly away to join those bumbling robins and those dastardly sparrows beyond the square in the wall. I would leave Master and his prettybird alone instead of forcing him to choose between us, but I can never bring myself to go. My splendor, while not enough to outclass the portal parakeet, may be too strong for my unrefined raptor brethren. I must perch in wait in this nighttime darkness, as they do, for the proper choice to come along for me to pounce on like an unsuspecting seed in the wild.

Today, one of those uncouth pigeons who so enjoy sitting on the railing outside of the wall-square were sniggering. Sniggering! They called me a fluff! How dare they!

And once again, Master has fled the apartment for sorrow. It is, I'm afraid, now or never.

Ducking from the view of the portal, I call to the bulldog on the floor, "Ho, sir! Your attention, please."

He unfolds his limbs with a series of grunts and yawns before glaring up at me. "Yeah? Whatcha want now, fluff-bird?"

The indecency of my neighbors these days is simply galling. I beat my wings with impatience. "None of that! Listen closely. Today, I take my leave of this place, and for that, I will need a favor of you. I want you to make a cake, do you understand? Then you must don a disguise as my butler and enter my abode. Leave me the cake and I will use it to distract the other bird while I escape."

For a few moments, the bulldog is dumbfounded by my master plan. "Oth'r bird?"

"Keep your voice down, you may alert him!" I hiss, glancing back at the portal. There is no sign of the prettybird.

But the bulldog bridles. "Oi, mist'r, I ain't helpin' you bust outta nowhere! Whadda I look like, some sorta crim'nal?"

"Can't you use your unparalleled salivary prowess to dampen these bars until they rust, then?"

"Where you gettin' these crazy ideas?" The bulldog's ears rise. "Ooh, I bet it's from the teevee! S'where all the crim'nals're at. Y'don't even know what's a cake, I bet. You're a bad boy!"

"Cease that nonsense!" I shout down at him.

"An' y'talk funny, too!" He runs in a circle. "Bad boy! I gotta stop you!"

Oh, squawk. This has gone to rot. The prettybird will be onto me now. I must act quickly, before Master returns.

"Stop, bird!" the bulldog continues to bark as I rush to the ground level of my abode in a flurry of shavings. There is a sliver

I have extracted from one of my woodbits dangling from the jingle-bell. I snatch it up in my most powerful talons and soar to my front entrance. It is latched, of course, to keep suitors and thieves out, but these are desperate times. Under the duress of the barking, I reach the sliver out between the bars and use it to alter the latch.

Master would have never provided me with the woodbits and latch were I never meant to leave, after all. I wanted to leave in dastardly fashion to make my exodus suitable to my undesirable nature, but this will have to do.

Voices come from beyond sight: "What's happening in there?" This voice is Master's.

"I don't know, he just started barking for some reason!" another voice says.

Knowing my time has run out, I twist the sliver to push the latch up from the catch. My door falls forward and I drop the sliver, swooping with all the grace of my predator ancestors.

"Stop!" the bulldog goes on, but I fly past his reach for the wall square. His barking has deterred the pigeons. My way is clear.

The wall-rectangle on the other side of the room opens. "What the—"

"Farewell!" I cry out in valediction and close my eyes in anticipation of freedom.

But the square rejects me. I crash with an unbecoming peep and flutter down to the table.

'What is this? A force field!' I struggle against it to no avail. I mustn't keep Master trapped here with me! I mustn't force him to suffer more than his heart was meant to endure!

Footsteps thunder behind me and the warm fleshwings of kindness enfold me. "Whoa there, fella! What are you doing out of your cage?"

I make no attempt to explain—tragically, my voice is too sweet for humans to decipher.

"Escapin', boss!" the bulldog offers anyway, though I suspect his own vernacular is difficult for anyone without my refined

hearing to understand. "I stopped 'im, though! I got 'im!"

"Alright, alright," Master says, giving the bulldog the esteemed Pat On The Head. "G'boy, buddy."

At very least, it shuts the brute up.

Master looks at the abode and the sliver I've left on the floor.

"Wow...you got out all by yourself? Pretty smart bird..."

Pretty...prettysmart...

His fleshwings deposit me in the entrance hall of my abode.

"There. I'll have to get a wire tie or something to make sure that doesn't happen again . . ."

"Hark, prettybird!" I cry up to the portal, hopping gleefully. "Ho, do you hear? Handsome, you may be, but in cleverness, you have met your superior, ha-ha! I'd like to see you do what I've done, oh, indeed! Oho, nihil dicit!"

Master tears his eyes away from my masterminded grace to look at the wall-square, where he must have put up the force field to prevent me from leaving him. "I guess you just got lonely without any other birds to chatter at, huh? Maybe I'll have to get you some friends."

"Oh, snap," the bulldog snorts. I have paused in my celebration to consider this prospect.

... More competitors?

No, I brilliantly contrive as I fly back up to my jinglebell to practice accompanying it with an evil laugh.

*Minions!*